

# Testing, Testing, Read All About It: Canadian Press Coverage of the PISA Results

*Michelle Stack*

This article is a critical discourse analysis of coverage in the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* concerning the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In this article, I have shown how numbers are interpreted through statistics to create a reality and analyzed the mechanisms used, through which information is constructed and reconstructed by and for the media. I have also explored how diverse voices are represented. The discourses of neoliberalism were embedded in the coverage of the PISA results and discourses that accentuated regional stereotypes were in use.

Key words: policy, media education, neoliberalism

L'analyse du discours critique présentée dans cet article porte sur la couverture dont a fait l'objet le Programme international pour le suivi des acquis des élèves (PISA) 2002 de l'Organisation de coopération et de développement économiques dans le *National Post* et le *Globe and Mail*. L'auteure étudie comment les chiffres sont interprétés à travers des statistiques en vue de créer une réalité et quels sont les mécanismes utilisés pour construire et reconstruire l'information par et pour les médias. Elle explore en outre comment les diverses voix sont représentées. Les discours du néolibéralisme faisaient partie intégrante de la couverture des résultats du PISA ; des discours accentuant les stéréotypes régionaux y étaient utilisés.

Mots clés : politiques, médias éducation, néolibéralisme

---

People "know," that is, whether and which schools are good or effective irrespective of any authentic knowledge of actualized teaching practices, curricula, student needs, and so on according principally to representations — images — reported in the press. Hence, the relationship between school and society — teachers and students and the larger public — is in fact mediated, at least in part, by images, by test scores which may or may not indicate anything at all about the day-to-day workings of contemporary classroom and school-based life (or even student achievement for that matter). (Vinson & Ross, 2003, p. 55)

The media are a central source of information about so-called good and bad schools for both the public and policymakers, yet literature about the power of the media has only recently been published. There is a small but growing body of research examining the role of the media in the policy-making process (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003; Franklin, 2004; Levin, 2004; Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; Wallace, 1993).

Ungerleider's (2003) analysis of public opinion about education in Canada points to the power of media in creating a sense of panic about public education. Guppy and Davies (1999) note that government sometimes reacts to negative media-reported poll data about education with new policy. Ironically, constant change in reaction to media charges of crisis in the education system creates more instability and might actually increase perceptions of chaos and crisis. Blackmore and Thorpe (2003) document how the Kennett state government in Australia effectively used the media to create policy problems and to recommend advice as to their logical solutions (p. 583). The government stated that the system was in crisis and, as it had been in the USA, the solution was to provide parents with choice and to institute more standardized testing. Blackmore and Thorpe (2003) argue,

The media is critical in the (re)production of policy as discourse, in that it becomes both the medium and the message for what policy is read to mean. The media simultaneously creates and taps into educational discourses (popular, professional and academic) that take on particular dominant readings in specific contexts, and is in this sense critical to the popular readings and meanings of certain key words, such as "standards." (p. 580)

#### SALIENCY, SELECTION, AND SOURCING

Emphasis on timeliness in the news means that news reports are usually episodic rather than analytical. Wallace (1993), in analyzing educational coverage, suggests that Bowe, Ball and Gold's (1992) three contexts — the context of influence, the context of text production, and the context of practice — are useful to theorizing the policy process. However, Wallace argues that the media should become a fourth context. Within this latter context, myths and counter-myths are produced, news values are selected, and information is conveyed to actors in the first three contexts,

and to the larger public. Entman (1993) explains that framing involves selection and salience.

To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. (p. 52)

Entman further argues that what issues get discussed depends on the framing the media uses. In other words, if schooling is primarily framed as the key to global competitiveness, how testing and achievement are discussed will be different than if schooling is framed as an institution that promotes equity and citizenship.

Tuchman (1983) found that the news media rely on framing from government and other influential actors and that news is often based on official press releases. Schudson (1991) states, "It matters not whether the study is at the national, state or local level – the story of journalism, on a day-to-day basis, is the story of the interaction of reporters and officials" (p. 148). It is important, as Warmington and Murphy (2004) argue, to recognize that the media may serve dominant interests but "that these dominant ideologies remain contested in specific, localized contexts..." (p. 287). Davis (2002) reports that in the United Kingdom, media convergence has led to fewer reporters and greater use of information subsidies (p. 27). Government is a key information subsidy, given that through ministry and centralized communications shops, it provides media with a constant source of stories packaged in the format desired by the media. Fishman's (1980) study of Canadian newsrooms points to how institutions that are accessible and well resourced provide predictable information subsidies.

Bennett's (1990) index model is helpful to understand coverage of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). He postulates that the variety of views reported, whether in news or editorials, depends largely on views expressed in government debates. Therefore, if there were debate about the usefulness of the PISA or questions about what it means or should mean to classrooms, there would be a wide range of opinions in the media. If, however, there is agreement among government officials, there is also agreement in the

media, thereby supporting a commonsense notion of what the results mean.

#### METHOD: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Throughout this article, I draw on critical discourse analysis. Discourse in the Foucaultian sense refers to a world that is not simply present to be talked about. Instead it is through discourse that the world is brought into existence. Unspoken rules exist about what can be spoken and what cannot. Discourse connects knowledge and power by demonstrating that those who have power control what is known and how it is known. Critical discourse analysis assumes that discourse practices mediate the connection between texts and society or culture (Fairclough, 1995). Critical discourse analysts attempt to make the implicit explicit and, in so doing, to uncover how discourse makes that which is based in ideology appear neutral and commonsensical. Part of this process is an examination of intertextuality. As Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) point out, "Through analysis of intertextuality, one can investigate both the reproduction of discourses whereby no new elements are introduced *and* discursive change through new combinations of discourse" (p. 7). The media coverage about the PISA provides an opportunity to examine interdiscursivity, which "occurs when different discourses and genres are articulated together in a communicative event" (Phillips & Jorgenson, 2002, p. 73). Examining media alongside press statements from governments and unions provided materials to look at intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Critical discourse analysis examines how discourse is involved in creating and recreating social structures as well as reflecting them. It sees discourse not as something that is merely in people's minds but embedded in social practice that is part of the real, material world. I am exploring the way the media use numbers to problematise the foundation through which the objectification and construction of reality and its manipulation are undertaken.

#### NATIONAL PRESS COVERAGE OF THE 2000 PISA

In this article, I analyze Canadian media surrounding the 2000 PISA, focusing on coverage by the two national Canadian papers: the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*.<sup>1</sup> I have analyzed all the articles about the

PISA 2000 that I could find in these two papers (13 in total, seven news articles, four columns, and two editorials). My research assistant, Sarah Mills, checked for articles through various databases and reading the respective papers' microfiches from December 4, 2001 (the day the PISA results were announced by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), to December 31, 2001. I consulted a number of websites to place the PISA results in the larger context of education, including websites for Ministries of Education in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Alberta. I was able to locate government press releases from Ontario, Alberta, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. Throughout the newspaper coverage that I looked at Alberta and Ontario are represented as separate entities; whereas, the Atlantic provinces are represented as one entity. I chose these regions to examine how the media relies on entrenched narratives around Western, Central, and Eastern Canada and because the *National Post* and *Globe and Mail* articles discussed these regions. Yet I also looked at press statements from teachers' federations from Alberta, Ontario, and Atlantic Canada. My research assistant contacted the Assembly of First Nations and Campaign 2000, a coalition of over 85 groups dealing with child poverty, to explore whether these organizations put out statements about the PISA. Neither of these groups released statements about the PISA; however, they disseminated reports that are relevant to the analysis of the PISA, which I have discussed later in this article.

I developed a thematic analysis that allowed me to look at frames used in explaining the PISA results. I analyzed the articles by first looking at the headlines. I concur with van Dijk (1988) who argues that headlines operate as retrieval cues by activating culturally shared stories and dominant ideological positions. They provide readers framing for a story. I also looked for correspondence between press releases and other government and organizational statements and media coverage. I examined these dimensions alongside a regional analysis in which I explored the variations in framing relative to Alberta, Ontario, and Atlantic Canada.

## SCHOOLS AS INDICATORS OF GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS OR GLOBAL FAILURE

The newspaper articles in my sample followed press releases from most of the provinces reviewed as well as the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), a pan-Canadian organization in which press releases are negotiated among the various provincial jurisdictions. The releases, not surprisingly, focus on the jurisdiction's ranking in comparison to other jurisdictions. For example, the CMEC (December 4, 2001, p. 1) press release states, "Canada ranks in top six countries in reading, mathematics and science, major OECD study concludes." The Ontario Ministry of Learning release reads, "International test results show Ontario near the top" (Ontario Ministry of Education, December 4, 2001, p.1) and the Alberta Learning release tells readers, "Alberta students achieve top marks on international testing" (Alberta Learning, December 4, 2001, p. 1). The press release from Prince Edward Island is less celebratory and focuses on Canada, rather than mentioning it was an international test: "Major Study of Canadian Student Performance Reports on Performance of 15-year-old Students" (Prince Edward Island, Island Information Service, December 4, 2001, p. 1).

Five articles in the *Globe and Mail* and eight from the *National Post*, that followed these press releases, drew on information from them, although three of the column headlines, unlike the government press releases, negatively cast what the results meant. For example: "Our schools: The best of a bad bunch" (Orwin, December 6, 2001, p. A20). Individual schools are reduced to being part of a bad system; therefore, their excellence is merely a sign of their mediocrity. A *National Post* headline might be construed as neutral or even positive by someone who did not have the social knowledge to understand the hierarchy of provinces and territories within Canada in which Atlantic Canada is frequently portrayed as a burden and is often the butt of humour: "Ontario lags Quebec, West in school test—Landmark OECD study: Ontario does exceed Atlantic Canada" (Sokoloff, December 5, 2001b, p. A1). Ontario is treated as a separate entity, whereas Atlantic Canada is a monolithic failure.

Seven headlines are celebratory; for example, a news item tells readers that "Alberta teens top worldwide literacy test—Excellent

reading skills of Canadian students could give them the edge in the global economy" (Honey, December 5, 2001). The micro-story in this headline is that students from different jurisdictions can be ranked, and the ranking can tell readers something about the quality of education in various places. The context of education is absent; it is a universal commodity that can be ranked within definitive measures of success and failure. One article activates a concern that has reached hysterical proportions in subsequent years: "Test shows boys trail in reading ability — parents, educators urged to take action" (Sokoloff, December 6, 2001d. p. A1). This micro-story activates the knowledge of other stories about feminized classrooms, the lack of role models for boys, and the failing achievement of boys versus girls. This article ignores how class and race factor into opportunities for achievement and relevance of schooling: the issue is boys versus girls.

Some headlines draw on meta-narratives about children ("Why Johnny Can Read"; Fine, December 6, 2001), or on children's stories ("A Happy Time for Public Education"; Kingwell, December 5, 2001). With the exception of one column entitled, "Lies, Damned Lies and Test Results" (Coyne, December 7, 2001, p. A17), the headlines tell readers that the results convey something valid and meaningful about the Canadian education system.

#### POVERTY DOES NOT MATTER IN CANADA

The central theme from the press releases and subsequent news stories was that Canada is doing well compared to the rest of the world, but that regional differences exist. Eight articles mentioned socio-economic status and stated that the gap between rich and poor is less in Canada than in other countries. Dianne Cunningham, chair of the Canadian Council of Minister of Education and Ontario's Minister of Colleges and Universities, was quoted in five articles. She explained to the *Globe and Mail* that "Our children understand what they read. This is good." She goes on to say that, "Teachers, students and parents, they are to be congratulated" and that "Income matters, but it doesn't matter that much in Canada" (Honey, December 5, 2001, p. A3). Cunningham was referring to data that lower-income children did less well than rich children, but in comparison to other nations the gap was considered

small. How increasing or decreasing support might affect the gap between the rich and the poor was not part of the media coverage. Instead, mysteriously poverty mattered in other countries, but not so much in Canada, although the scores in the poorest parts of Canada were low.

The dominant framing was that poverty was less important in Canada than other places. Peter Gzowski (December 8, 2001) celebrated the high test results, but he also stated his fear that Canada was moving towards a two-tiered education system. His was the only article that connected the test results with current policies around literacy that might increase disparity. For example, there was no analysis of massive changes that Ontario had or was about to introduce at the time the 2000 PISA results were released, including a high-stakes grade-10 literacy test. A plethora of research has demonstrated the negative effect of high-stakes testing on poor students and racialized minorities (Aronowitz, 2004; Bracey, 2000; Madaus & Clarke, 2001). Campaign 2000, a coalition of 85 groups concerned with child poverty, released a report that stated 18.5 per cent of children in Canada lived in poverty and that the social safety net was becoming weaker (Campaign 2000, 2001, p. 1). This report is not referenced in media coverage about the PISA; instead, overall the media coverage follows the government press releases in celebrating an apparently decreasing gap between the rich and the poor in Canada.

#### LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: CANADA AND ITS REGIONS

The newspaper articles contained the same points as these press releases, but they regionalized the news into the “good” Alberta, the “so-so” Ontario, and the “bad” Atlantic Canada. The press release from the Alberta Ministry of Learning declared that the test showed that Alberta has one of the best education systems in the world because of the high quality of teaching and curriculum (Alberta Learning, 2001). In a *Globe and Mail* article, “What Is One Province’s Secret to Top-Notch Academe?” readers are told that, “The secret behind Alberta students’ top grade in the Canadian section of an international study released yesterday likely is more than one factor, including the province’s standardized curriculum and highly educated population” (Mahoney, December 5, 2001, p. A3).

Mahoney's article quoted Scott Murray from Statistics Canada who explained that high achievement is related to regular testing, a standardized curriculum, highly trained teachers, parental involvement, and high parental education. He is quoted, stating "There hasn't really been enough analysis done to identify specifically what Alberta is doing right, but it has most of those things and has had them longer than several provinces" (Mahoney, December 5, 2001, p. A3). It is interesting to note how factors are made into physical things that can be broken down to explain differences. But do we know if Alberta has them in greater supply or if one is more important than another? Do we know that standardized testing leads to greater learning? Indeed, one study found that for the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) eight of the top ten scoring countries had a standardized curriculum but so too did the bottom eight out of ten (Atkin & Black, 1997). The article went on to say that Alberta has a highly educated population and teachers, financial prosperity, an open-boundary system, and low taxes. It is unclear how the author determined these factors are in greater supply in Alberta and more importantly how they connect to the test results. The article is imbued with neoliberal assumptions that the marketization of education is a positive direction for schools. A *National Post* article declared that,

At a press conference yesterday, Alberta's success was lauded by education experts who commended the province's formula of frequent testing, standardized curriculum and high expectations from parents and teachers, and financial support for disadvantaged schools. (Sokoloff, December 5, 2001b, pp. A1 and A20)

Sokoloff seemed to take the press conference as the only reality. Who are the "experts"? Do parents and teachers in other jurisdictions have low expectations? How is this measured? There are educational experts (Kachur & Harrison, 1999; Taylor, Neu, & Peters, 2002) who do not applaud the Alberta education system; yet it appears that educational experts are unanimous in declaring the success of the Alberta system.

In an article titled "Why Johnny Can Read," Fine (2001) of the *Globe and Mail*, congratulated Alberta. Fine explained that Premier Klein had cut back on education, but now a multimillion-dollar innovation fund

was making programs such as "Galileo, a program focused on using computers as part of learning, possible" (p. A23). Again, there is a correlation made between the program and the test scores but no evidence given to verify any causal connection, or that increased test results would equate to schools being what Fine refers to as less "stodgy places" (December 6, 2001, p. A23). What is, perhaps, more interesting is how Fine's emotional testimonial comes to stand for Alberta's education system.

I was moved to tears in an Alberta classroom. A school I visited last year had discovered the secret to engagement, and the results were astonishing. In retrospect, it's no surprise that Alberta's pupils should be at the top of the heap in Canada, and in the world's upper echelon, in reading, science and math scores made public by the OECD this week. (p. A23)

Fine took his experience at one school as a sign of the entire system's success. The dominant frame is that Alberta has a superior education system and that the test proves this. Alberta appears to be both innovative, yet is focused on standardized tests and curriculum. However, one *Globe and Mail* article ends with citing a professor of educational policy from the University of Alberta, Jerry Kachur, who stated: "What the tests show is that Alberta students are able to write those tests....It's very difficult to say more than that" (Honey, December 5, 2001, p. A3).

The journalists for all thirteen articles relied on government sources to contextualize the PISA results. Indeed, they might have referenced many possible sources, such as the Alberta Teachers' Federation (ATF). For example, the day before the release of the 2000 PISA, the Alberta Teachers' Federation published its monthly *ATA Magazine* in which the president detailed his concern about the increased use of testing in Alberta as a "new improved sorting machine" (Booi, December 4, 2001). Booi made a compelling argument for how the system is focused on the test and the large amount of time getting kids "in the range" to perform better. He challenged the assumptions made that 15 per cent of children will not meet acceptable standards and that this sorts them into successes and failures and does not provide adequate support to allow all students to succeed. Nevertheless, I happened upon an article in the *Calgary*

*Herald* in which Boo (Derworiz, December 5, 2001, p. A1) declared that the PISA test results prove Alberta has a high quality education system. Like the Alberta government, Boo made strategic use of the test results. The government used the results to show that *their* school system, with its regular testing and standardized curriculum, was excellent. Boo used the results to show that educators were excellent. The ATF was not cited in any of the *Globe and Mail* or *National Post* articles.

*Ontario: Reporting the Government Line*

An Ontario Ministry of Education's press release headlined with "International Test Results Show Ontario Near the Top" (2001, December 4). The article focused on how Ontario beat the United States and Germany in science and math and how it was improving. It made no mention of Ontario's score in relation to other provinces in Canada, but did stress the importance of education to the global economy. It assured readers that the new rigorous curriculum would raise student achievement. The release also implied that the test results were used to inform policy: "The international tests and province-wide standardized tests in Ontario help to set strategies to improve learning and achievement for all Ontario students" (p. 1). This press release lauded the results as demonstrating that Ontario's system was exemplary.

Simultaneously the Ontario government was carrying out a campaign to gain support for a program that would test teachers, based on the assumption that many teachers did not have the basic literacy skills needed to teach. Also at this time the government introduced strict-discipline schools for students expelled from mainstream schools as well as a grade-10 literacy test (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2006; Robertson, 2004). Arguably such measures will serve to increase the gap between already marginalized (read – economically disadvantaged and racialized minorities) and less marginalized students.

The Minister of Education, Janet Ecker, spoke to the Ontario Teachers' Federation in August 2000.

There was overwhelming evidence – in report after report – that public education in this province was in serious need of renewal. Parents and taxpayers kept calling for fair and equitable funding, for up-to-date and challenging curricula with more rigorous standards, and for regular assessments of students'

basic skills. That may explain why there is strong support for initiatives such as the teacher testing program, so that we can ensure that teachers are up to date and doing the best job possible. (Ontario Ministry of Education, August 22, 2000, p. 2)

Ecker's speech differed considerably from the press release concerning the PISA results. The initiatives outlined in Ecker's speech were portrayed as moving a system from bad to good, rather than a system that was excellent but in need of further improvement. Teachers were congratulated in the PISA press release, but clearly seen as weak in Ecker's speech.

A press release from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) headlined, "Ontario Government Myths About Public Education Shattered by Results of International Test" (December 4, 2001), was not picked up by the *Globe and Mail* or the *National Post*. This release stated that the PISA test demonstrated that the old curriculum was effective and preparing students for work and that private education was not better than public education. The Government used the test results to show the system was good but could be improved. The OSSTF used the results to show educators excelling and that the system was good as is. There is a gap between the reality put forward by the Conservative government and the Teachers' Federation, with the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* favouring the government perspective. The gap points to how the framing of statistics links with broader issues of political power and the way it is reproduced.

Ontario is represented as a space where resources are rich, there is conflict, but that overall the system is strong, although not as strong as Alberta's. There are no references to weak families. There is some surprise that the most powerful province in Canada did not manage to get a top score on the test, but that instead the cowboys and cowgirls of the country —the Albertans—won the show.

#### *Atlantic Canada: The Pathological Family*

The press releases from Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island focused on how well they did in comparison to the rest of the world but also mentioned that Atlantic Canada scored below the Canadian average. The Minister in Nova Scotia stated, "We know that Nova Scotia students can

perform better...and we're looking at ways to help them do that" (Government of Nova Scotia, December 4, 2001, p. 1). The PEI Minister stated that the results were acceptable. He also explained, "I am confident that PEI will improve its standing in future assessments" (Government of Prince Edward Island, December 4, 2001, p. 1). Unlike Ontario, neither referred to introducing a different curriculum or other changes. The PEI ministry press release acknowledged the Atlantic provinces' standing in comparison to other provinces, but added that they were above the national average on the Science Achievement Indicators Program.

Coverage from the two national papers painted a very different picture. Four articles stated that Atlantic Canada did the worst on the test. There was description but not an explanation for why the scores would be so low for Atlantic Canada. A front-page article in the *National Post*, however, did provide explicit and implicit explanations for the difference in scores.

"Children from advantaged backgrounds do just about the same in every country," said Scott Murray, of Statistics Canada, adding that the success of a country's education system depends largely on the performance of its poorest students. Poverty in Atlantic Canada contributed to the low performance of students there, although socioeconomic status is not the only factor in student achievement.

Family structure, for example can play a role. Students from two-parent families did better than those from single-parent families in seven out of 14 countries surveyed by the OECD, including Canada. Students in Atlantic Canada whose parents, particularly mothers, did not complete high school or go on to college could end up with lower expectations of their own achievement. "We need to focus on parents reading with their families," said Dianne Cunningham, Ontario's Minister of Colleges and Universities. "That old kitchen table is still an important opportunity to ask questions, to have discussion and to read together." (Sokoloff, December 5, 2001b, pp. A1 and A20)

Here, a number of issues occur in which Atlantic Canada is represented as deviant. It is not clear if Atlantic Canada has fewer parents reading to their children or more single-parent families. Furthermore, factors are treated in isolation from each other. Single-

parent families, for example, are more frequently economically disadvantaged than two-parent families. How does poverty factor in? We are told that in 7 out of 14 countries, children from two-parent families did better. How about the other 7 countries? Did success on the test have anything to do with resources afforded to families whether there were one or two parents? There is a focus on the seemingly pathological Atlantic family rather than on the larger issues of poverty that influence Atlantic Canada. The “old kitchen table” invokes a Waltons-like family where men work and women stay home with the children. The single mother who is working minimum-wage jobs to make ends meet and consequently has little time to sit around the kitchen table is not part of the picture, except perhaps as a pathological mother who failed to complete high school. There is no room to examine what does happen in schools in the four Atlantic provinces. The test results want to prove they are failures in comparison to the rest of the country. The framing of statistics shifts the problems from that of material infrastructure (poverty) to the pathological tendencies of a group of people. This displacement is a building block through which realities are de-politicised from their sociopolitical and economic foundations and normalized or otherwise canonized in the form of pathologies.

Richard Foot of the *National Post* (December 11, 2001) starts his article with the following:

The wretched showing by Atlantic Canada in an international education study released last week sparked a round of recrimination in the region’s newspapers. Many demanded answers from provincial education ministers.... Although Canada fared well globally, the East Coast provinces scored the lowest results within Canada. (p. A19)

The article goes on to quote regional papers that decry the failure of Atlantic Canada. The truth of the test is not questioned. It definitively proves that Canada is divided into distinct spaces of success and failure. A *Globe and Mail* editorial warns readers,

In particular, Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec are strong performers — so strong that, nearly across the board, they are the only provinces above the

Canadian average. (Class, this means averages can mislead. They can hide weak performers, such as the Atlantic Provinces, which are at the bottom of most categories in Canada and thus are in the middle rank in the world. Or Ontario which struggles to reach the national average). (Editorial, 2001, p. A18)

Here again Atlantic Canada is a failing space. Ontario is a struggling one, but not so low that its students' scores negatively affect the Canadian average.

#### MORE THAN ONE STORYLINE

Heather Sokoloff, who wrote four pieces for the *National Post* about the PISA results, included information unique to her articles and not gleaned from the government press releases. In an article entitled "Canada in Top 5 in Schools Study," she mentioned that 37 per cent of "Canadian students said school is not a place they like to go" (Sokoloff, December 4, 2001a, pp. A1 and A18). This rather startling statistic, however, is not explored. How is it that Canada can be in the top, yet have over one-third of its students disliking school? Why do they dislike school? Will they continue to engage in formal learning given they would rather not be at school? How many of these students do not finish high school?

In two articles Dianne Cunningham was quoted on the topic of parental involvement. But Sokoloff (December 5, 2001b, p. A20) challenged the assumption of parents being the cause of success or failure: "Parents in Alberta lead the country in involvement, but P.E.I. parents — where scores were much lower — were just as involved. In Quebec, parents' interest in their children's academic and social life was low" (p. A20). How it is determined that Quebec parents care less is not explained; instead it is stated as a most certain fact. Again, issues such as parental involvement are treated as separate from economic issues. No connection is made, for example, to the increased resources of parents in richer provinces to pay for private tutoring and lessons that might improve their children's test scores.

Counterintuitively, the *National Post*—known for its conservative, market-based leanings—also included an article written by Sokoloff (December 5, 2001c, p. 20) quoting experts who state that Canadian public schools are as good as private schools. Sokoloff went on to explain that private schools score higher on tests, but this is an indication of the

students' socio-economic status, rather than better instruction. The article states that "'They [private schools] do better because private school attendees tend to have parents who have more education and higher incomes and that has a positive influence on outcomes' said Scott Murray, director-general of social sciences and institutions in Statistics Canada" (p. A20). It appears income in and of itself makes for better parents.

Sokoloff's articles stand out because of their depth, but also because she presented the narratives around the PISA as somewhat contested, albeit the central narrative—that the test tells us something significant about education in Canada—remains entrenched.

#### CONCLUSION

Bracey (2004) has noted how nations that do well on the test are more likely to accept the results on face value than those that do not do well (p. 477). This observation is certainly evident in the Canadian coverage. The PISA results were transformed into statistics that came to stand for the success or failure of the education system. The use of statistics is a powerful tool, used by both media and government. As Hacking (1981) argues, social statistics are a relatively new technology of power. Statistics are presented as an objective measure of progress; yet who decides whether it is important that a child learns marketable skills, or that a child is accepting of diverse ways of being and knowing, is based in power relations. So, too, are the statistics that become the common-sense framework of how policymakers discuss the various and competing purposes of education as well as the performance of the education system. The issue is not statistics or testing but the interpretation of them. The issue is that statistics provide the media with a simple mechanism of appearing to report reality, which is made into a story with the use of emotional anecdotes and/or expert quotes that lend verisimilitude to the numbers. As Ball (1990) argues, "Meanings thus arise not from language but from institutional practices, from power relations, from social position. Words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different discourses" (p. 18). Therefore, how tests are interpreted and the solutions

proposed based on these interpretations are dependent on which institutions and power relations are given primacy in this process.

The media play a central role in determining the issues that are debated and ultimately how policymakers and the public interpret these issues. Similar to other news stories, the PISA results and their interpretations are isolated from policies that could influence how the PISA results came to be and what the results might be in the future. The statements of ministers of education were not contextualized or connected to policies being enacted in their respective provinces.

There are power struggles for media attention. However, around the results of the PISA, government sources dominated. For the most part the interpretations of the test results treated students as one group. Andrew Coyne (December 7, 2001) (*National Post*) mentioned that the test was not given on reserves. There is no other mention of inequality among groups. Inclusion is a form of symbolic power that communicates one is part of the collectivity that is Canada. Conversely exclusion from the test also represents exclusion from the collectivity, for example, reports from the perspective of First Nations who might provide a counter-narrative in terms of educational resource allocation around the extreme disparity between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. In the articles I reviewed, only one educational researcher was given space to query how the test results do, or should, influence policy. Voices of parents, students, and teachers were absent.

As my analysis has shown, spatial context is crucial to understanding the heterogeneous manner in which media operate across locality and how this serves to entrench regional stereotypes. And, the focus on elite sources decreases the ability to have a discussion about the meaning of test results for different groups, how or if tests should be used in policy, the ideological underpinnings of testing and the sociopolitical interests involved in declaring an educational system a success or failure, and the stereotypical regional narratives that are invoked.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Deirdre Kelly and Andre Mazawi for reviewing an earlier draft of this paper and to Sarah Mills for assistance in locating articles.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The PISA was first administered in 2000 to students in 43 countries. It is a standardized test, administered to 15-year-olds, and focuses on math, science, and reading.

## REFERENCES

Alberta Learning, (2001, April 12). *Alberta students achieve top marks on international testing*. Edmonton: Government of Alberta, press release.

Aronowitz, S. (2004). *Against schooling: Education and social class*. Retrieved January 30, 2006, from <http://www.cust.educ.ubc.ca/workplace/issue6p1/aronowitz04.html>

Atkin, J. M., & Black, P. (1997). Policy perils of international comparisons. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 79(1), 22-28.

Ball, S. J. (1990). *Politics and policy making in education: Explorations in policy sociology*. New York: Routledge.

Bennett, L. (1990). Towards a theory of press-state relations in the United States. *Journal of Communication*, 40(2), 103-125.

Blackmore, J., & Thorpe, S. (2003). Media/ting change: The print media's role in mediating education policy in a period of radical reform in Victoria, Australia. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(6), 577-595.

Booi, L. (2001, December 4). *Standards and sorting system*. Retrieved January 30, 2006, from <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Quick+Links/Publications/Magazine/Volume+82/Number+2/From+the+President.htm>

Bowe, R., Ball, S., & Gold, A. (1992). *Reforming education and changing schools: Case studies in policy sociology*. London, UK: Routledge.

Bracey, G. (2004). International comparisons: Less than meets the eye. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 477-478, 85(6).

Bracey, G. (2000). *High stakes testing*. Arizona State University, Education Policy Studies Laboratory. Retrieved December 10, 2004 from <http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsil/EPRU/documents/cerai-00-32.htm>

Campaign 2000. (2001). *Family security in insecure times: Tackling Canada's social deficit*. Retrieved January 30, 2006, from [www.campaign2000.ca](http://www.campaign2000.ca)

Council of Ministers of Education. (2001). *News release: Canada ranks in top six countries in reading, mathematics, and science, major OECD study concludes*. Toronto: The Author.

Coyne, A. (2001, December 7). Lies, damned lies and test results. *The National Post*, p. A17.

Davis, A. (2002). Public relations and news sources. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *News, public relations and power* (pp. 27-42). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Derworiz, C. (2001, December 5). Alberta students lead the world. *The Calgary Herald*, p. A1.

Editorial. (2001, December 5). Hmm. Not a bad report card, really. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A18.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. London, UK: Hodder Headline Group.

Fine, S. (2001, December 6). Why Johnny can read. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A23.

Fishman, M. (1980). *Manufacturing the news*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Foot, R. (2001, December 11). The bottom of the barrel. *The National Post*, p. 19.

Franklin, B. (2004). Education, education and indoctrination! Packaging politics and the three 'Rs'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(3), 255-270.

Government of Nova Scotia. (2001, December 4). *News Release: Nova Scotia students perform well internationally*. Halifax, NS: Department of Education.

Government of Prince Edward Island (2001, December 4). *News release: Major study of Canadian student performance reports on performance of 15-year-old students*. Prince Edward Island Information Service, p. 1.

Guppy, N., & Davies, S. (1999). Understanding Canadians' declining confidence in education. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 24(3), 265-280.

Gzowski, P. (2001, December 8). Whoopee, the kids can read. But don't, for a second, think the job is done. *The Globe and Mail*, p. F3.

Hacking, I. (1981). How should we do the history of statistics? In G. Burchell, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect*. London, UK: Harvester.

Honey, K. (2001, December 5). Alberta teens top worldwide literacy test—Excellent reading skills of Canadian students could give them the edge in global economy. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A3.

Kachur, J., & Harrison, T., (1999). Public education, globalization, and democracy: Whither Alberta. In T. Harrison & J. Kachur (Eds.), *Contested classrooms: Education, globalization and democracy in Alberta* (pp. xiii-xxv). Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press.

Kingwell, M. (2001, December 5). A happy time for public education. *The National Post*, p. A18.

Levin, B. (2004). Media-government relations in education., *Journal of Education Policy* (Vol. 19, pp. 271-283): Taylor & Francis Ltd.

Lingard, B., & Rawolle, S. (2004). Mediatizing educational policy: The journalistic field, science policy, and cross-field effects. *Journal of Education Policy* (Vol. 19, pp. 361-380): Taylor & Francis Ltd.

Madaus, G., & Clarke, M., (2001). The adverse impact of high stakes testing on minority students: Evidence from 100 years of test data. In G. Orfield & M. Kornhaber (Eds.), *Raising standards or raising barriers? Inequality and high stakes testing in public education* (pp. 85-106). New York: The Century Foundation.

Mahoney, J. (2001, December 5). What is one province's secret to top-notch academe? *The Globe and Mail*, p. A3.

Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2006, June 5). *The Ontario Safe Schools Act: Backgrounder*. Retrieved June 5, 2006, from [http://www.ohrc.on.ca/english/consultations/safe-schools\\_3.shtml](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/english/consultations/safe-schools_3.shtml).

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2000, August 22). Speaking Notes: Notes for Remarks by the Hon. Janet Ecker, Minister of Education to the Board of Governors of the Ontario Teachers' Federation Annual Meeting. Niagara on the Lake.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2001). *New Release: International tests results show Ontario near the top*. Toronto: Ontario.

Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (2001, December 4). *News Release: Ontario government myths about public education shattered by results of international test*. Toronto, ON: The Author.

Orwin, C. (2001, December 6). Our schools: The best of a bad bunch. *The National Post*, p. 20.

Phillips, L., & Jorgensen, M. (2002). *Discourse analysis as theory and method*. London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Prince Edward Island Information Service (2001). *News Release Major study of Canadian student performance reports on performance of 15-year-old students.* Charlottetown: Prince Edward Island.

Robertson, H.-J. (2004, May). Litigating literacy. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85, 714-715.

Schudson, M. (1991). The sociology of news: Production revisited. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass media and society* (pp. 141-159). London, UK: Arnold.

Sokoloff, H. (2001a, December 4). Canada in top 5 in schools study. *The National Post*, pp. 1, 18.

Sokoloff, H. (2001b, December 5). Ontario lags Quebec, West in school tests—Landmark OECD study: Ontario does exceed Atlantic Canada. *The National Post*, pp. 1, 20.

Sokoloff, H. (2001c, December 5). Wealth affects test scores: OECD study. *The National Post*, p. 20.

Sokoloff, H. (2001d, December 6). Test shows boys trail in reading ability - Parents, educators urged to take action. *The National Post*, pp. 1, 13.

Taylor, A., Neu, D., & Peters, F. (2002). Technocratic control and financial governance: A case of two school districts. *Education Management and Administration*, 30(4), 469-486.

Tuchman, G. (1983). Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), 660-679.

Ungerleider, C. (2003). *Failing our kids: How we are ruining our public schools.* Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

Van Dijk, T. (1988). *News as discourse.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Associates.

Vinson, K. D., & Ross, E. W. (2003). *Image and education: Teaching in the face of the new disciplinarity.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Wallace, M. (1993). Discourse of derision: The role of the mass media within the education policy process. *Journal of Education Policy*, 8(4), 321-337.

Warmington, P., & Murphy, R. (2004). Could do better? Media depictions of UK educational assessment results. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(3), 285-299.